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## Bwiti: an Ethnography of the Religious Imagination in Africa

NYU Conference on  
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**James W. Fernandez**  
Princeton University Press, 1982



Fang Bwiti  
Gabon

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### Chapter 18

#### Equatorial Excursions: The Quest for Revitalizing Dreams and Visions

*Za kulu mbi awu.*  
(Come open the door of death.)

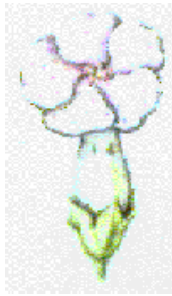
#### THE NEW LIFE OF OYANA NDUTUMU

When Oyana Ndutumu made up her mind that, she wished to become a member of Bwiti the leaders of the chapel at Assok Ening asked why. She was a daughter of the village, the sister of a man who had long been a Banzie (the members of the Bwiti, properly, "those of the chapel"). She had just been sent back from her second marriage and her family was in turmoil trying to gather the bridepayment they were obliged to return. She replied that she hoped that Bwiti would enable her to make a successful marriage and to have children. In part her two divorces came, she said, because she was a nervous woman and infertile.

That evening the membership held a ceremony to "put the question," to find out from Bwiti whether the woman was a sorcerer and thus inadmissible or whether she had strength enough to eat eboga and to see Bwiti. Banzie only very occasionally died in initiation from an overdose of eboga but it was just such deaths that brought missionary reaction and administrative repression. So at midnight the membership filed out with candles in their hands to the forest to the spot where an otunga sapling had been located. It was pulled out of the ground without difficulty, a good sign that Bwiti was in favor of the initiation. Also that night the nima na kombo (leader of the Bwiti chapel) ate large amounts of eboga in order to "talk" with the ancestors. He received no objections from them. So at the first hour, at dawn, after the engosie (the night-long Bwiti celebration), the woman was brought to the chapel and admitted to initiation.

The first spoonful of eboga is given at 9 a.m. The initiate was seated in the front of the chapel close to the central pillar looking inward toward the altar. Before her on a mosingi skin (the skin of the wildcat esinga) was placed a basket full of eboga. Two members of the chapel, male and female, were assigned to be her father and mother of eboga (essa eboga, nyia eboga).

Before midday they had urged upon her sixteen teaspoons of eboga. At midday the antelope horn is blown as a first alert to the ancestors that a descendant is coming



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among them. By 3 p.m. the initiate had consumed sixteen more teaspoons of eboga and was taken to the stream for initiation.

As Oyana was a slight woman I expressed concern to the kambo, the supervisor of ritual activity who was directing the initiation, about the possibility of an overdose. But Ona Pastor replied that no man or woman would ku ebbga (fall under the spell of eboga) in less than thirty teaspoons and it often took sixty teaspoons to swell the soul on the tendons and veins of the body so that it could break free and journey off to Bwiti. When the soul begins to expand, he said, the skin begins to feel like a silk shirt which will easily burst and allow the soul to escape. The father and mother of eboga were, in any case, keeping careful track of the initiate's condition in this respect.

Preceded by the ngombi (eight-stringed harp employed in Bwiti), the initiation procession made its way down to the stream. The initiate (etema, Popi, or ebin, Fang) was followed by her mother and father of eboga and by the director of initiation and his assistant. In final place came an old woman proffering a plate full of eboga. The procession made its way into the deep forest to a glade where the stream widened. The walking made the initiate sick from the eboga she had consumed and she had to be allowed to vomit before purification could proceed. This worried the Banzie present, for if she could not stomach eboga she would not "see" Bwiti. In any case it would simply lengthen the time before she would see it. The director of initiation ran his finger through the ejecta to see if there was any blood or evil substance, but none was found.

When she had recovered herself she was led into the stream and up beyond a bend by her mother and father of eboga to confess her sins. She was there stripped to the waist. Periodically the voice of the father of eboga would be raised beyond the intervening trees, remarking on a particular sin. Meanwhile the various leaves and powders of initiation were laid out on a leaf upon the bank. After the confession was over the father and mother of eboga waded back to get the plants of purification. The father took back a mixture of flowers and leaves of the plant called by Fang myan (*Costus lucanusianus*). In Bwiti it is called by the Pongwe term okosakosa.

The mother took the leaves of the abomenzan plant (*Piper umbellatum*). Both of these plants give off a strong perfume. The father of eboga first chewed the myan and spat it out upon the initiate. He then washed her down with stream water. This was to purify her and open her eyes so that she would see Bwiti.

Then the mother rubbed her down with abomenzan. The odor of this plant was attractive to the spirit of the dead and to Bwiti and would excite them to have pity and take interest in the plight of the initiate.

The father of eboga now returned downstream to obtain the final packet of powdered bark which he handed to the mother of eboga. The initiate, stripped entirely naked, was rubbed down with this bark powder. This powder was a mixture from the bark of twelve trees (one was actually a forest bush). They were named to the initiate one by one. They were described as good and pure trees, well regarded by the ancestors and all of important medicinal use.

"Learn these trees!" the initiate was admonished, for they are the "forest of Bwiti" (afan Bwiti). Because of her infertility Oyana had once attempted to be cured in an MBiri ceremony, the curing cult collateral to Bwiti. The director of initiation therefore took the occasion to tell her, "Remember that Bwiti is a religion of trees (nyiba bile) while MBiri is a religion of herbs and plants (nyiba bilawk)." The twelve trees from which the barks were taken were: asam (*Kapaca guineensis*), the "paletuvier," eyen (*Disimananthus benthamianus*), azap (*Mimusops djave*), ovung (*Guibourtia Tessmannii*), azem (*Psilanthemus manii*), mfol (*Enantia chlorantha*), eteng (*Pycnanthus angolensis*), aseng (*Musanga acropioides*), the otunga umbrella tree (*Polyalthia suaveolens*), mbel (*Pterocarpus soyauxii*), asas (*Bridelia grandis*), and adzam ntoma called elegalenga (*Ocimum americanum*), the plant added to the mix to give it a perfume.

Though eight of these trees were those customarily sacred to Bwiti, four were unusual. But no special explanation was given. No one, said the kambo, knew the exact number of trees in the forest of Bwiti. In fact the membership had debated as to whether there were to be twelve or thirteen trees. They had settled on twelve barks as being the midnight number, the hour in which Bwiti would come to the initiate.

After being rubbed down with these barks the initiate donned her white dress of initiation and returned to the glade. Her father and mother of eboga stood spreadlegged in the stream. Oyana Ndutumu got down in the water and crawled through their legs. This represented her birth in Bwiti. The director of initiation then stepped into the stream and struck the initiate over the head with the large phallic-shaped flower of the parasol tree (zoseng aseng).

There had been some joking about the phallic shape of this flower while descending to the stream. But the purpose of the action was to open the woman's head again, as it was when she was an infant, so that her soul might escape. Her mother and father of eboga followed suit in striking her head.

Finally, with only the initiate left in the water the director of initiation went 15 or 20 feet upstream and lit a cube of pitch on a manioc leaf. Gently placing the leaf in the water he floated it down through the woman's legs.

All watched as, still alight, the "soul boat" (byal nsisim) disappeared around a bend on its way to the ancestors in the sea (mang). In a like manner, later in the initiation, the woman's soul would drift off to the ancestors, but in an opposite direction.

The initiate was brought to the bank and given eleven more teaspoonfuls of eboga. The procession back to the chapel reformed. The initiate, now quite rubber-legged, had to be helped up the hill. The procession circled the chapel once, the central pillar once, and then stopped just before the chapel. The otunga sapling that had been pulled up in the forest was now planted just in front of the chapel. All Banzie present aided in tamping down the earth around the plant. The otunga was to be the ladder by which the spirit of the initiate would mount to heaven. A chicken was then sacrificed at the otunga. The chicken would go to heaven and announce the coming of the spirit.

As it was still a long time until the commencement of the engosie, at 9 p.m., the initiate was taken off to a special chamber where she continued to eat eboga. At 10 p.m., now virtually comatose, she was brought out before the altar to face the harp. Propping her up, her father and mother of eboga listened carefully to her mumblings. It was apparent that she was having a visionary experience—that she was "seeing Bwiti." But the specifics of her vision could not be communicated or elaborated until the next morning when she had recovered from her "eboga" inebriation to begin her "new life." At that time she claimed to have traveled up the path of birth and death and seen her dead grandmother who took her over a crossroads in which a red road intersected with a black one. Not far beyond she found herself in a great crowd of voices. One in particular repeated insistently what she took to be her new Banzie name, Nanga Misenge. She heard or saw nothing more.

### THE EATING OF EBOGA

In important part the initiation experiences of Oyana Ndutumu (and of all Banzie) are stimulated by the large amounts of eboga ingested. "Eboga" or "eboka" is the Fang name for *Tabernanthe iboga*. The species name as well as the Fang name is taken from the Galwa-Mpongwe or Miene language term, *iboga*.

The bush, which occurs in at least two varieties (*T. iboga* and *T. manii* - not always distinguished botanically and apparently of similar, psychotropic qualities), is common in the equatorial underforest. Its psychotropic properties have long been known,<sup>\*(1)</sup> particularly its capacity, in small quantities, to maintain wakefulness and confer

resistance to fatigue. This may have induced German colonial authorities to allow the use of the drug by Africans building colonial roads and railroads in the Cameroons at the turn of the century. \*(2) Indeed the capacity of the plant to suppress fatigue - quite apart from its capacity to produce visions-has been a principal attraction to Banzie. They must dance all night and hence they value the euphoric insomnia produced by the drug. So important is eboga that in some chapels the members are not called banzie but nzieboga (eaters of eboga). And the usual form of asking why a Banzie joined Bwiti is to ask him why he ate eboga.

Indeed in some chapels there is a pervasive synecdoche in which eboga is taken for the whole - it is eboga that is prayed to and sung to and not Bwiti or any of the gods or ancestors.

The eboga bush, an apocynaceous shrub, grows to about four feet in height. It is cultivated in the open courtyards of Bwiti villages, usually at the sides of the chapel and the ancestral welcoming hut. It produces yellowish or pinkish-white flowers and a small orange fruit whose sweet pulp is edible though not narcotic. In Bwiti the fruit is sometimes used as a medicine for barrenness in women. The main alkaloid(#1) - ibogaine - is contained in the roots and particularly in the root bark. The mode of consumption in Bwiti maximizes access to the alkaloid. The root bark is rasped and eaten directly as raspings or ground as a powder or left to soak in water to be drunk as an infusion.

Eboga was the psychotropic drug of choice in Metsogo Bwiti whereas in the Fang ancestral cult, Bieri, two different drugs were employed: malan (*Alchornea floribunda*) and ayang beyem (*Elaeophorbia drupifera*).(#2) We have seen how Bwiti origin legends credit the discovery of eboga either to the Pygmies (they may actually be the source of the drug for all equatorial peoples), or to the intervention of the ancestors, or the great gods. In point of fact the extensive use of eboga in Fang Bwiti diffused to them from the Metsogo.

The Metsogo claim to be surprised by the casual use of eboga by Fang and are not surprised to hear that death results. Before giving large amounts of eboga to initiates Metsogo test them out with small amounts first "to see if they can support the drug or if they have evil spirits which will use the drug as an excuse to kill their host." Metsogo also claim to watch over the initiate much more closely in the process of initiation. But in Fang Bwiti, the mother and father of eboga (roles, it appears, taken over from Metsogo) provide very close supervision.(#3)

Eboga is taken in two ways. (1) At each engosie it is swallowed in small doses of two to three teaspoonfuls for women and three to five teaspoonfuls for men before and in the early hours of the ceremony. There may be an additional several grams eaten at mid-course, after midnight. This represents ingestion of between four and twenty grams of powdered eboga. (2)

Once or twice in the career of a Banzie a massive dose of eboga is taken for purposes of initiation and to "break open the head" in order to effect contact with the ancestors through collapse and hallucination. One to three small basketfuls may be consumed at this time over an eight to twenty-four hour period. This represents an ingestion of between two hundred and one thousand grams, up to sixty times the threshold dose and, in the upper reaches, close to a fatal dose. Though the range between threshold and fatal toxicity in the alkaloids is great, it is not surprising that the death of initiates is commented upon in all chapels. In the past forty years a dozen charges of murder or manslaughter have been brought against Bwiti leaders who have lost initiates. The effect of such high dosages can last up to a week and for that reason Banzie say they can only tolerate this dosage once or twice in a lifetime.

The lighter regular dosage of two to five teaspoons does not produce hallucinations, though adepts of Bwiti claim that once a man has "met eboga" and been taken by "him"

to the "other side," any subsequent amount will raise in his mind many of his former experiences. The regular dosage, therefore, may have that associative power, but it is taken primarily to enable the adepts to engage in the arduous all-night ceremonies without fatigue. Members often say that the eboga taken in this way also lightens their bodies so that they can float through their ritual dances. It enables them to mingle more effectively with the ancestors at the roof of the chapel. They do not report visions under the influence of such amounts, only modest change in body perception and some dissociation.

The massive doses taken at initiation produce both physical and perceptual changes - such things as a gross reduction in the initiate's ability to moderate or program motor activity, the appearance of chromatic spectrum on the margin of objects in the perceptual field, and a sense of "objectivity" or distancing from one's own body. This latter is a crucial sensation as far as Banzie are concerned. It is evidence of the beginning of the visionary excursion as well as of the rising to the ancestors at the roof of the chapel. But practically all physiological and perceptual consequences of eboga are given meaning in Bwiti.

Early in the day of initiation the initiates are allowed to rise and evacuate when they wish. Several hours into the initiation, as we have seen, they are taken down to a stream to be purified in preparation for their meeting with the ancestors. As ingestion of the drug proceeds the initiates rise no more.

They sit upon their white cloth gazing expectantly toward the rear of the chapel and continuing to eat eboga heaped upon the civet-cat skin between their legs. They may gaze, with fascination upon a mirror propped before them in those chapels which employ this device. In it their ancestors may seem to appear to them, though they are actually seeing their own faces perceived under the influence of eboga. Behind them sit their mothers or fathers of eboga, calming their anxieties and listening carefully to their excited mumblings as the eboga works upon them. They may already be experiencing a sense of departure from self and of visionary encounter. Their mumblings may convey important information to the entire membership. Eventually the initiate will fall over and have to be supported and carried from the chapel to a special chamber within it or to a special hut or arena behind it. Being initiated and eating eboga is often called "sitting down" or "getting down" to the earth. All members of Bwiti have to "get down." The final stage of that process is collapse. The collapse is an indication that the initiate's soul has left him and in the company of the ancestors is wending its way through the forest to a final and confirming vision in the land beyond - the land of the dead.

The phrase "wending through the forest" describes the visionary experience of practically all initiates. For the forest is experienced first, whatever subsequent elements may appear. The visions thus confirm the fact frequently emphasized by Bwiti leaders that Bwiti is a religion of the forest (nyiba ye afan). It also explains why eboga, a plant of the forest, represents something beyond itself - it represents the forest and power over the forest.

Banzie take the forest unto themselves in many ways, but most fundamentally and powerfully in the eating of eboga; it gives them both an identification with and mastery over the forest. Amidst the pressures upon Fang in the colonial world to leave the forest, to abandon their villages and launch themselves upon the arteries of commerce and wage labor, this powerful powder of the forest returns Banzie to that milieu in a meaningful way. (#4)

## **EBOGA VISIONS**

Dreams did not play a meaningful role in Fang life. (#5) In initiation into the ancestral cult, however, visions were cultivated, and the dreams which took place after initiation as men slept close to the reliquary were studied carefully. In Bwiti the visions which accompany initiation and the eating of massive amounts of eboga are always elicited by

leaders and interpreted for the adequacy of the experience, the acceptability of the initiate to the spirits and great gods, and the future role of the initiate in the religion.

An eboga name is usually given in the vision as well as, very often, a religious specialty such as the playing of the harp or the guarding of the chapel. The eboga visions are an important part of the "breaking open of heads" (abwing nlo) and the opening up of the Banzie to the fuller possibilities of self and of universe which Bwiti promises. More than sixty open-ended discussions were held with individual members of the religion concerning both their reasons for joining and the nature of their initiation. Fifty of these discussions contain reliable information on the initiation experience. Thirty-eight vision experiences or lack of experiences were reported. Twelve members of a particularly secretive chapel were reluctant to discuss the visions in any way. (6) Twenty-one vision experiences were noted in their entirety. Failure to see visions and refusal to tell them are frequent enough to be honestly reported. Before summarizing the reasons given for eating eboga and the contents of the visions it is instructive to give seven representative visions.

We begin with two visions which were refused. The particular chapel in which the following vision was refused had years before undergone severe repression by colonial authorities and by missionaries. This chapel tended to be wary of imparting any information to anyone. As far as the failure is concerned, our figures show it to be frequent enough in encounters with eboga. Not all initiates are as equable as this particular informant, however, and most would try the initiation again at a later time." Many who found nothing in the plant would leave Bwiti, since so much of its promise hinges upon "going down with eboga."

1. The vision (refused) of Engomo Obama (Zambi Evanga). Age 28, Clan Essabam. A younger brother, with one wife, no children. Has a small cocoa plantation but gets nothing from it. District of Mcdouneu, Bwiti Chapel at Efulan. Ate eboga two years before.

REASONS GIVEN: I danced and ate a bit of eboga when I was in Libreville years ago. But I saw very little. But now, recently, my brother became sick in the head. He began telling me to eat the eboga. I ate eboga because the beyim (witches) had put thunder (zalan) in the head of my brother, and he became a fool. He had already seen the road and was going to become a Banzie.

But when the thunder came into his head he said he could no longer see in the eboga. He told me to take it because I should see what he had been looking for. The nima na kombo of our chapel said not to tell what we saw in our vision, because it belongs to us here, But I saw those whom my brother was seeking to see.

2. The failed vision of Nyimeh Ondo (Mendombo). Age 42 Clan Yebingwan. Five wives and four children. District of Mitzik, Bwiti Chapel at Ondondo. Ate eboga eight years ago.

REASONS GIVEN: I ate eboga at Ondondo. My father of eboga was Mba Ngwe, my mother's younger brother. He kept after me to eat eboga, but I could see no reason to eat it. But finally he convinced me to eat it because I would, see something in it and perhaps my mother. I ate only because I wanted to see what was in it. He told me I would have to go to the ground to see. But then I ate the eboga several times and saw nothing. But I have continued to be a Banzie because my heart tells me it has been the right thing even though my head has not been opened. The heart of the Fang is more at home in the music and dance of Bwiti.

The following two visions have the incomplete quality of many that are collected in category 2 below (hearing voices) and particularly category 3 (seeing ancestors). The incompleteness may be a consequence of many factors - quality of the eboga taken, attitude set of the individual and the nature of the guidance he has received from the leaders of the chapel, and so on. But often it is a consequence of the initiate becoming

so violently ill that he cannot complete the initiation, although he may still have visions. That is the case in these two accounts. The first account shows, incidentally, how similar delirium in sickness is to eboga hallucinations in the eyes of the Banzie. Their visionary component is essentially the same except that eboga has a therapeutic result.

3. The vision of Mebang Mbe (Ngondo Ekumu). Age 33. Last wife of a Banzie. No children. District of Oyem, Bwiti Chapel at Kwakum.

REASONS GIVEN AND VISION: For a long time I resisted eating eboga although my husband encouraged me. But when I became very sick and nearly died, my husband decided to transport me to the Chapel at Kwakum. I was in agony and saw a road going through a house. I followed this road a long way to a crossroads, where a man with a great lance stopped me and said, "Where are you going? You are not dead." And he pointed back. I found myself in bed in Kwakum. I remained sick for some weeks and my experience decided me to find the solution to this illness in eboga. But when I took it a year ago I saw only my father and a woman carrying a basin with various herbs. The woman was washed by my father, and my father turned to me and said, "You must return all the things that are in your stomach." I got up and with the help of my mother of eboga went to the river and threw up. I have not been sick since.

4. The vision of Abeso Mungeh (Nzambi Evanga). Age 54, Clan Nkojeng. Has a small coffee plantation. Has three wives and one child. District of Oyem, Bwiti Chapel at Kwakum.

REASONS GIVEN: I ate eboga here five years ago. I had seen Bwiti in Libreville but I had not danced it. I am a mimia (a person without a witch) and I have nothing to protect me, so I decided to eat eboga to see if that way our old people and God would listen to our prayers and grant them. Nothing was coming to me as a Christian.

VISION: I didn't see much. I traveled a red path and came to a village of one house with one door and one window. Two white men were sitting at either end of a table. They were writing. That was all. I returned then. But I was dissatisfied so I took a big dose of eboga again and this time I saw my mother and she was surrounded by many people. She died when I was young and I didn't recognize her. But men surrounding her said it was my mother. She came and stood at my right. Another woman came with a child and stood at my left. I reached for the child but she held it away from me. Then I became sick and had to pass out to the edge of the forest to throw up. As I came back I saw a host of small babies laughing and playing together in the air. That was all I saw.

The following five visions, arranged by increasing length and showing some diversity within type, all have those stereotyped features characteristic of category 4 (walk down the long path) which comprises One-fifth of the visions collected. These visions are treated in more detail in our analysis below.

5. The vision of Biyogo Ondo (Zambi Evanga). Age 45, Clan Evon or Nkojeng. Two wives. A planter of four hectares of cocoa and coffee. District of Mimvoul, Bwiti Chapel at Engoen.

REASONS GIVEN: I worked at Libreville in a shop many years ago and I saw much Bwiti but I never ate eboga. When I returned to Mimvoul seven years ago I ate eboga. I was a man who ought to have been rich in the preparations my father gave to me (akomnge ening). But I have not become rich. Witches closed the path to me. The Banzie, whom I came to consult, told me to eat eboga. For if I ate eboga I would see my father again and he would give me counsel.

VISION: When I ate eboga I saw my elder brother. He didn't see me or speak to me. Then I next saw another brother, who was not dead, but I saw him there in the eboga. I saw his body on the ground beside the road I traveled. (Two weeks later, that brother died!) This road led to a great desert that had no limit. There my father descended before Me in the form of a bird. He would accompany me back. On returning, I saw



Christians dressed in animal skins-belts of antelope. They carried heavy crosses around their necks. They were to the left on a path that led off the path we followed. As we returned, my father gave me a ngombi, the harp, and he told me that would guarantee me in my life.

6. The vision of Mve Ndong (Mvanga Abena Mokuku Kanja). Age 36, Clan Efak. Two wives, no children. Coffee planter with four and a half hectares. District of Mitzik. Chapel at Amvan.

REASONS GIVEN: I have married many women, of whom I have only two now, but I got no children from them. One day after work I was asleep resting, and suddenly in my sleep my mother came from the left of the room and my father from the right. This was when I was working in Libreville some years ago. They asked me why I didn't eat eboga. I responded that it was mad medicine. My mother said no, and she showed me a small leaf package from which she ate eboga. She bid me go to a certain friend of mine, who was a Banzie and have him give me eboga. Then I ate eboga these three days and three nights. [interviewed just after initiation.]

VISION: I started up a red road and passed through a village full of people whom I heard in their huts crying and wailing. On each side was a hill with a fine house on each. Beyond the village I came to a river, and three women were there fishing bones out of that river and placing them on the bank. I floated across the river, at the other side of which was a crossroads with three roads: silver, gold, and red. Standing in the center there was my father. He said, "See where you have arrived with the power of eboga." I passed through his legs and started up the gold route, which became brighter and brighter. I came to another crossroads, where I found the otunga planted.

There, under the otunga, the chicken that had been killed for me When I started eating eboga was alive and scratching. Beyond the otunga a man was shining on a cross. I knew him from his pictures. It was Eyen Zame (the savior figure, one who sees God and brings the word and vision to mankind). I passed beneath the cross to a house of glass on a hill. It was the house of Nyingwan Mebege (female principle of the universe). Within was my brother. He was secretary and writing for two men all in white, who sat at either end of a long table. He was writing my history and my name as a Banzie. Then my father of eboga called me back, for I should go no farther.

7. The vision of Mendame Nkogo (Ngadi). Age 32. Cocoa planter. One wife, two children. District of Oyem, Bwiti Chapel at Sougoudzap.

REASONS GIVEN: I was skeptical. The Banzie challenged me, so I decided to eat eboga. They actually convinced me by giving me three teaspoonfuls. I felt something. That was several years ago.

VISION: I saw in the mirror that they had set in front of me a great crowd of black men approach. They were then changed to a great crowd of white men. I found myself in a garden surrounded by a crowd of people whose color I do not know. I was surrounded by eboga bushes, and by two chapels of Bwiti. Then I saw my grandfather at the other end of the garden in a hollow in the rocks. And I saw myself as a child sitting between his legs. Then that child which was me changed into a ngombi (the cult harp), which my grandfather was playing. And now, whenever I play the ngombi I know it is my grandfather playing through me. My grandfather arose and took me in something like a plane to the land beyond. He took me to Nyingwan Mebege. She was a beautiful woman - just a glimpse I had. She was too beautiful to look at. Then my grandfather showed me again the ngombi and said that I must play. It would always lead me to another land and be the route of the Banzie. My grandfather then explained to me all the parts of the ngombi. At midnight the ngombi is no longer of wood. Nyingwan Mebege comes into it and it becomes her. Grandfather told me to look at the sun. It blinded me. I saw a path to Eyen Zame. I knocked against the door but Eyen Zame said I could not enter. This was because I still had black skin. All the dead are white. When I

die I will become white like the ntangan. My father of eboga saw that I was already gone too long with eboga. He brought me back. He gave me sugar cane to eat. Now whenever I eat eboga, I see or hear my grandfather.

8. The vision of Ndong Asseko (Onwan Misengue). Age 22, Clan Essabam. Not married, he is an "aide-chauffeur" but also plants coffee in his father's village. District of Oyem, Bwiti Chapel at Kwakum. Taken several weeks after initiation.

REASONS GIVEN: Nzambi Evanga Beyogo Ondo mwan Evon gave me the eboga. I was a Christian but I found no truth in it. Christianity is the religion of the whites. It is the whites who have brought us the Cross and the Book. All the things in their religion one hears by the ears. But we Fang do not learn that way. We learn by the eyes, and eboga is the religion that enables us to actually see!

VISION: When I ate eboga I found myself taken by it up a long road in a deep forest until I came to a barrier of black iron. At that barrier, unable to pass. I saw a crowd of black persons also unable to pass. In the distance beyond the barrier it was very bright. I could see many colors in the air but the crowd of black people could not pass. Suddenly my father descended from above in the form of a bird. He gave to me then my eboga name, Onwan Misengue, and enabled me to fly up after him over the barrier of iron.

As we proceeded, the bird who was my father changed from black to white-first his tail feathers, then all his plumage. We came then to a river the color of blood, in the midst of which was a great snake of three colors-blue, black, and red. It closed its gaping mouth so that we were able to pass over it. On the other side there was a crowd of people all in white. We passed through them and they shouted at us words of recognition until we arrived at another river, all white. This we crossed by means of a giant chain of gold. On the other side there were no trees but only a grassy upland. On the top of the hill was a round house made entirely of glass and built upon one post only. Within I saw a man. The hair on his head piled up in the form of a bishop's hat! He had a star on his breast, but on coming closer I saw that it was his heart in his chest beating. We moved around him, and on the back of his neck there was a red cross tattooed. He had a long beard. Just then I looked up and saw a woman in the moon - a bayonet was piercing her heart, from which a bright white fire was pouring forth. Then I felt a pain in my shoulder. My father told me to return to earth. I had gone far enough. If I went farther I would not return.

9. The vision of Eman Ela (Misango ki Nanga). Age 30, Clan Essamenyang. One wife, who is a Banzie, and no children. He is the oldest of his brothers and a planter. District of Mitzik, Bwiti Chapel at Akuruzok.

REASONS GIVEN: A man of the Mvang Clan gave me the eboga. I ate the eboga for other black men. I am Sorry for the other black men and their suffering. I also ate the eboga to be able to play the ngombi well. I also searched in it to have many children. Years ago my father, who was a Banzie for a time, gave me some eboga. But I saw nothing in it.

VISION: When I ate eboga, very quickly my father came to me. First he had black skin. Then he returned and he had white skin. My grandfather then appeared in the same way [i.e., in a white skin]. It was he that gave me my eboga name. Because my grandfather was dead before I was born, he asked me if I knew how I recognized him, It was through eboga. He then seized me by the hand and we found ourselves embarked on a grand route. I didn't have the sense of walking but just of floating along. We came to a table in that path.

There we sat and my grandfather asked me all the reasons I had eaten eboga. A man there wrote all these down. He gave me others. Then my grandfather disappeared, and suddenly a white spirit appeared before me. He grasped me by the arm and we floated along. Then we came to a crossroads. The path on which we were traveling was red.

The other two routes were black and white. We passed over. Finally we arrived at a large house on a hill. It was built on one post. Within, I found the wife of my mother's father. She gave me my eboga name a second time and also gave me the talent to play the ngombi harp. She told me to work it until eternity. We passed on and finally arrived, after passing over more crossroads, at a great desert. Nothing was there!

There I saw descend from the sky - from the moon - a giant circle, which came down and encircled the earth, as a rainbow of three colors - blue, red, and white. There were two women in white at each side of that circle. I began playing the ngombi under the rainbow and I heard the applause of men. I returned. All the Banzie thought I had gone too far and was dead. Since then I have seen nothing in eboga. But each time I take it I hear the spirits who give the power to play the ngombi. I play what I hear from them. Only if I come into the chapel in a bad heart does eboga fail me.

In all the visions collected, not only the ones given here, we noted five different reasons given for eating eboga. In order of frequency the reasons given were: (1) because of the urging of a dead relative in a dream; (2) because of attacks by witches, causing impotence, sterility, pain, and sleeplessness; (3) because of discontent with the missionary religions; (4) because of a desire to know Zame (last of the creator gods); (5) because of a general malaise and sickness. Inquiry was also made as to the content of what was seen. But this is a tricky question and subject to secondary elaboration. The visionary is likely to become a folk narrator, and standardized elements from Bwiti culture appear that were not part of the original vision. Also, the vision is more elaborated the further one is from the experience itself. Many Banzie solidify and embellish their visions the more they recount them. We shall not attempt the difficult task of sorting out secondary elaboration. Both primary and secondary vision experiences are an integral part of Bwiti culture.

| CONTENT                                                                                                                                 | n=38 | %  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|----|
| 1 Saw nothing and heard nothing                                                                                                         | 9    | 24 |
| 2 Heard many voices, a great tumult, and recognized the voices of ancestors. Saw nothing                                                | 8    | 21 |
| 3 Heard and saw various of my ancestors. They walked with me and instructed me on my life in Bwiti and elsewhere                        | 13   | 34 |
| 4 I walked or flew over a long multicolored road or over many rivers, which led me to my ancestors, who then took me to the great gods. | 8    | 21 |

It was not clear from these discussions whether the high percentage who claimed to have no significant experience (24 percent) were those who, infrequently, became so nauseated as to vomit repeatedly and finally withdraw from the initiation. The last two categories of vision experience and particularly the fourth, the most detailed, show an instructive stereotyping.

In general, women's accounts of their visions are much shorter than men's accounts though there is no belief in Bwiti that women have shorter excursions than men. It appears that women's primary objective is to make contact with a dead relative, very often a dead child, and when this is accomplished the vision experience is fulfilled. Men are more elaborative. They also confess to being, initially, more skeptical, and their visions tend as a consequence to be more exploratory, as if the very richness of what they discover overcomes their skepticism.

Looking directly at the twenty-one most fully reported visions we note four categories of experience, including the physical reactions to initiation. These reactions were seldom reported by the members except under prodding.

1. CONTACT WITH THE DEAD. All the visions involved visual contact with some dead relative or with a whole group of relatives. These could be children (7) or babies waiting to be born (2). In one vision a black baby Jesus (Emwan Mot) provided passage to the

great gods. Other cases involved a paternal grandmother (5), a paternal grandfather (2), a mother (4), a father (7), an elder brother (2), unspecified brothers (3), or unspecified relatives (3). Sometimes these relatives appeared in exceptional manifestations.

Father or grandfather descended in the form of a bird and took the initiate flying with him (3). In one case the grandfather took the initiate in a small airplane. On occasion the relatives changed from black to white (4). Or they might be all dressed in white. In one case the relatives wore brilliant uniforms. They might be sitting at a table, occasionally in a large house, doing paper work (3). The dead engaged in various actions besides escorting the visionary. They gave eboga names to initiates (8), gave ngombi (harp), or the power to play ngombi (5), taught initiates how to cure themselves (4), passed the initiate through their legs (1), or made the initiate eat eboga (1). Once, the father washed a woman.

**2. EXPERIENCES OF THE VISIONARY EXCURSION.** Fifteen of the visions involved a prolonged excursion up a long path usually in the company of a relative or with relatives along the way. Often the road was specified as red (8). In all cases, the mode of progress was unusual, sometimes being suggested as similar to floating or flying (6). The end of the road might offer a remarkably different landscape from that of the road itself, such as a large, grassy clearing, a grassy upland, or a grassy hill (6), or a desert (4). A house built on one post was sometimes found on this landscape (5), with entry either permitted (3) or denied (2). Descriptions of this house stated that it was built entirely out of glass (2), had one supporting pillar, one door, one window (2), or was simply a great house. In two cases eboga plants were seen on the grassy clearing. In one case a many-colored circle (full rainbow) descended from heaven on this clearing; in another case the otunga (sacred tree or post of origin) was reached. Rivers of various colors, but never more than three, were encountered as obstacles along the route (7). Twice a monster was discovered in a river - a giant snake or a giant crocodile who, however, enabled passage across. Once a giant gold chain spanned the river, and once women were seen fishing bones in the river. Crossroads were also encountered (11), but never more than three times. The intersecting roads were varicolored. Sometimes white men or white Africans sat at a table in the crossroads checking identity, shuffling papers, and allowing passage (4). Once a man with a spear, and another time a white man, barred passage. Visionaries commented on various features experienced on the route: passing large crowds of black people (5), or white people (2), the whites once being a crowd of Christians in animal skins; passing a village taken to be the village of the dead (5), once having only one house, the chapel of Bwiti; and once seeing a Catholic and a Protestant church on hills on either side of the village.

**3. EXPERIENCES WITH THE GREATER POWERS.** In twelve instances the visionary encountered one of the greater supernatural powers, in particular Nyingwan Mebege, the Sister of Zame and the female principle of the universe. She was seen in various manifestations (9), as a beautiful woman (4), as the moon, which is her orb (2), once with a bayonet piercing her heart, as a ngombi (cult harp) that changed into herself and back again into the harp. Once she appeared inside the house of one post, and once she was doubly manifested, descending on either side of the many-colored circle.

The initiates viewed the personage of Eyen Zame Onyi Bot (5). He was seen three times as a person inside the one-pillared house, once as a bishop with a cap of hair and a star heart visible in his chest, and once as a black babe that retreated into the one-story house and locked the door against the visionary (his Mwan Mot or "child of man" aspect).

**4. PHYSICAL REACTION TO THE EXPERIENCE.** Visionaries infrequently volunteered any information about their physical reaction to the vision. They often described nausea, but not as a part of the visions. Three times they mentioned a floating, flying feeling, once a feeling that their body color was changing, and once a sensation of the heart burning and becoming pure as flame.

The Banzie consider the many diverse elements present in these visions as contained in the power of the root itself to reveal realities of the beyond. But, of course, these visions have their source in previous experiences, the first of which is the experience of other Banzie who have taken the drug in initiation doses. Though there is no formal instruction preparing the initiate for his visions, the experiences of others are recounted to him. Since an occasional overdose, moreover, may lead to the death of an initiate, there is an air of expectancy to the whole experience, which is heightened by the hope of seeing a dead relative. These experiences together lead to an anxious search for preinformation on the part of many initiates. But afterwards there is remarkably little detailed recounting or anything approaching excited recall. The initiate soberly recounts his experience to the chapel leaders to confirm the power of eboga and to see whether an inspection of the vision will reveal any secret knowledge of value to the members. Otherwise a decorum of disinterest is shown toward the initiate. It is recognized that the eboga vision is an intimate affair which must be free from public prying.

### **EBOGA AND THE CONTINUITIES BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH**

It is clear that a fulfilled and satisfying eboga vision is an extension into the unseen, the death realm, of the path of birth and death which the all-night ceremonies evoke and follow. Most visions are a following of that path. What the liturgy can only suggest, the taking of eboga actualizes. The visionary experience of probing or passing out into unseen realms has long been a source of what Bot ba Njock calls "intellectual preeminence" (#8) among Fang. Banzie do pride themselves on their "intellectual preeminence," at least in the cosmologic sense-and the visual intelligences brought to them by Bwiti confirms it. They repeatedly say of communion in the missionary churches, "There you take communion and only taste. In Bwiti you take communion with eboga and you see!"

It is eboga that fulfills the eschatological promise of Bwiti, the promise to pass members over to the realm of the dead. This coming to terms with death and the reestablishing of contact with the dead was fundamental in the ancestor cult as well. Indeed, mortality seems to have been of particular vexation to Fang. Early missionaries frequently found Fang asking them to explain death to them. (#9) They were especially interested in Christian notions of resurrection. Correspondingly, commentators on Fang culture, beginning with Largeau, noted with surprise that Fang seemed to feel that a person who had fainted was dead. Alexandre, as well, (#10) commented on differing Fang views of the definitiveness of the process and hence their different views of the possibilities and miraculousness of resurrection. Such diffused views of death were supported by Fang ideas of multiple souls. For while one soul was tied to the body as its animus, another could come and go until the disappearance of the body, and still another soul had permanent existence independent of the state of the body. (#11) From such various views of death and such beliefs in multiple souls Bwiti could easily derive the belief that those inebriated, alienated, or comatose under the influence of eboga had passed over and explored the death side of things. They were as "dead men."

Beyond a notion of death which contained the possibility of experiencing death while still not dying definitively there was also an old notion of the struggle with death, the struggle to prevent its taking hold of mankind.

Nassau says that among the Miene people of the coast there was an old salutation, "What evil law hath god made," which referred to death. (#12) He interprets the Miene greeting "mbolo," widely adopted by Fang, as expressing the wish that the stranger should be free of the threat of death. The claim to have died, to have known and to have mastered death, and to have the power to resuscitate the dead, is a very old one among would-be religious leaders in western Equatorial Africa. (#13)

Among the branches of Bwiti, Asumege Ening takes a particularly strong interest in the problem of death and frequently refers to the engosie as akomnbe awu - the

preparation for death. Accordingly, the chapels of Asumege Ening are often called Metsugu Etsenge (the last of the earth). The leaders of the chapel carry prestige in virtue of the number of times they have "died." Of any Banzie it is true to say, as they say themselves, that "he is accustomed to death," "he knows death because eboga has showed him death."

There are a variety of metaphors which Banzie, as Fang before them, escaped the discontinuity between life and death. These images suggest in fact that continuity is the more natural condition. There is the crossroads metaphor, which is an intermediate image between continuity and discontinuity, being both at the same time - a road that continues and yet a road that must be crossed over. The image even more suggestive of continuity is the umbilical cord, the cord that holds together life and death. The umbilical cord is ever-present in Bwiti and is represented in the braided red and white yam. It is worn around the waist and held in the left hand as, during prayers, the genealogy is recited. For the genealogy is, figuratively, a long line of umbilical cords that attach a person directly to all those beings, ancestors and great gods, in the land of the dead. When a Banzie dies his genealogy is recited in order to alert all these ancestors whose names appear there of his coming. This "clears the path" in his genealogy. This recitation, said to "open the door of death" (kutu mbf awu), presents a motif which is recurrent in the song cycle. For Banzie feel that the door of death has been closed upon the African and that he or she has come to live in a state of pronounced discontinuity between life and death. A final image is the mirror employed in initiation (much more widely in MBiri than in Bwiti) in which the ancestor, actually the reflection of the initiate, appears during the final stages of the ingestion of eboga. This image implies not only a continuity but a unity of the living with the dead. (#14)

Though the conditions of the colonial world have acted to exacerbate discontinuities between the living and the dead in the eyes of Banzie, such discontinuities were always a possibility for Fang. This is seen in the old custom of the lifting of the curse (ava meteng) on the deathbed. This was done in case any hostilities between generations had acted inadvertently to create discontinuity in the genealogical line and had thus blocked up the benevolence that should naturally flow down it. We recall as well that the elder generation might in the custom of showing naked (alere sheshe) abruptly cut off the younger generation from genealogical continuities.

### THE DEAD AND THE DYING REDEEMED

The old Fang "lifting of the curse" was generally understood to proceed from elder generations to younger generations, and that is seen in its primary locale - the deathbed. It was initiated by the dying. But the lifting of the curse could also be initiated on the part of the younger generation about to embark upon some dangerous enterprise, hunting, or warfare. In Bwiti the lifting of the curse has entirely that emphasis. It is a redemptive act undertaken by a younger generation, the living, to restore the line of communication and the flow of benevolence from those older than they and particularly the dead.

There are two acts of ava meteng in Bwiti: the apongina and the ava meteng proper. The apongina is an act of respect and the Fang word for respect (eseme) is often used. It is an action performed by one younger to one elder. It removes bad feeling and assures blessing and benevolence from that person. The engosie itself is often called an act of respect to the dead. The younger person kneels in front of the older person, who takes the younger's two hands in his own, slides them against the sides of his chest under his arms, brings them forth, cups them, and blows into them. (in the old "lifting of the curse" the older blew on the head of the younger.) Then the younger person takes his hands, rubs them down his chest, and throws them wide in thanksgiving. Older Fang notions of the power and potential for enmity that resides in the chest (nkuk) appear to be involved here. That power is sought by rubbing from without and by blowing from within. The blessing is a passing down rather than a storing up of power.

An elder of the chapel does not need to be present as the agent for the passing of power. During prayer periods apongina may be made directly to the ancestors and the great gods. The kneeling membership taps three times upon the ground and then raises its cupped hands to the "above." Receiving the power they "pour" it over themselves. They rub the flats of their hands over their chests. Apongina is rarely given or taken unless under some influence of eboga. Eboga is felt by Banzie to be efficacious in all that concerns spiritual flow and in the passing of power.

Sometimes accompanying the apongina but usually independently of it and at appropriate moments in the path of birth and death, particularly in the path of the harp, a "lifting of the curse" will be recited in Popi Fang. This recitation is given together with the translation prevalent in the Koungouleu-Kwakum Chapel of Asumege Ening. (#15)

*Ye ye kebwe Oh miwandzi elsenge. Oh miwandzi a kombi oh, nanga mi suo. Oh tita Zambi a Pongo oh! Me mana memboka o. Me mokaenya pasa bilondo ngadi ye duma ye nkumbe ye ngondo ye. Me pasama. Bebae. Lube ye. Tsenge ye. Mepasama bebaj. Bazingo ye bama ye. Me pasama. begai. Naki, naki Ekoso. Kombi na mombango me. Yoki yoki, zaa ka, zua ka. Esumba na motina. Ngak, ngak, Angumba kambondo. Maga buti ye. Mikando miasiga. Vengo vengo. Mabondo musigo. Vengo vengo. Oh vengo vengo. Tsetsae isae. Kubengi ngi, nzok ngi ngi. Adendang dang. Me yena nati, efuga medenga.*

*Banzie, nima na kombo, banganga bokaye!*

*Ye the beginning. Spirits of the earth. Spirits of the heaven. The place where we pass through. Father Zame who is the Gate Keeper. I come to a new country which is the cemetery. I strike out with the raffia streamers. Lightning and thunder. Sun and Moon, Sky and Earth. They are twins together. They are life and death. They are twins together. The yawning hole of the grave and the new life, they are twins together. Stamp stamp and no answer. The spirit is in the turbulent wind of the of village of the dead. Joy, joy the ancestors give joyful welcome and hear the news. The troubled life of the born ones is finished, finished, finished. And now the disciplines of the dead. I go to the dead. All the misfortunes are shorn away! They leave, they leave. They leave. They leave. Everything clean, clean. All is new, new. All is bright, bright. I have seen the dead and I do not fear.*

*Banzie, leaders, priests, people of eboga!*

The "lifting of the curse" in Bwiti, we see, makes a significant change from the traditional Fang recitation which was much shorter and more concentrated. The two forms are similar only at the end, in the cleaving, away of the dirt of misfortune and unsuspected malevolence. The Bwiti lifting of the curse is otherwise a much more dramatic series of images portraying the voyage of the soul into the land of the dead. It is a lifting of the curse designed to facilitate that voyage and restore continuities between the living and the dead. But it is also integral to the whole dramatic celebration of the path of birth and death. The living who are to die are redeemed in relation to the dead who once lived. They are but "twins together."

There is a recondite and elliptical quality to this chant - a need for amplification that is also found in the midnight sermons. The effect produced is one of a succession of images which are not readily grasped without cultural context. For example, the phrase "stamp stamp and no answer": this refers to the Fang custom of the elders solemnly stamping down, in a kind of last farewell, the newly reshoveled dirt of the grave. In this stamping one is imagined to be knocking on this last earthly house of the departed. Because the chant is in Popi it is recondite and often inaccessible to Banzie. (#16)

## STAGES AND STEREOTYPES IN INITIATION

Initiation is expected to go through several stages and have a certain content. Both the

mother and father of eboga watch the initiate and listen with this in mind. There are stages in both the mechanics of initiation and in the visionary experience itself. Though there is some variability in the Banzie sense, of the divisions of initiation, six stages can be distinguished. First, Stage I, there is a period of probing the night before the day of initiation to see if the candidate is acceptable to Bwiti and to eboga. To test this a small amount of eboga may be given. The next day, Stage II, there is a long period from morning into the afternoon of quiet ingestion of substantial amounts of eboga (up to a hundred grams). With the initiate well under the influence of the eboga he or she is taken, in Stage III, into the forest to be confessed, bathed, and purified as we have described. In Stage IV the candidate is returned to the chapel and continues to eat eboga amidst the activity of the engosie. Finally around midnight he or she will collapse - fall over in a stupified or comatose state. This is "eboga death" and it signifies arrival in the land of the dead. At this stage, V, the initiate is removed, to a special chamber in the chapel or behind it in order to conclude in peace the visionary experience and to recover. No more eboga is given. The final stage, VI, is that of the morning return to the membership and the recounting of the experience. In a word, six stages: testing, ingesting, purifying, stupefaction, "dying" or excursion, and reintegration. This division accords well with the Banzie tendency to speak of stages or "sojourns" (azak) during the initiation: (1) "the stage of preparation" (azak akomnge); the stage of journeying (azak awulu); the stage of collapse and death (azak awu); the stage of wondrous reverence in the presence of the spirit (azak awume); and the stage of going to the above - to the ancestors and Zame (azak abet). Banzie do not consider the "return to the living" to be a stage in initiation, although it must be performed carefully as the reported experience of the returning initiate makes an important contribution to his own sense of membership as well as to the entire membership's sense of the surpassing reality with which they are dealing.

These stages of initiation constitute a set of expectations which are communicated to the initiate before he begins his "eboga" journey. (#17) His journey is adumbrated for him. It is not enough that he should merely pass out. In mild doses inebriation and uncoordinated physical behavior are condemned because they interfere with or confuse the proper treading of the path of birth and death. In the initiation, where stupefaction must inevitably take place there is, nevertheless, a certain orderliness that is expected. Thus the setting in which eboga is taken is controlled by chapel leaders; a set of attitudes and expectations about the experience is also conveyed. It is not surprising, therefore, that there is considerable stereotyping in the content of the visions.

The stereotyping is, in part, a consequence of the sequence of experiences the initiate undergoes. The experience of being moved out into the forest to a stream for purification and then being brought back into the tumult of the ongoing engosie in the chapel undoubtedly accounts for the frequency with which the crossing of streams and tumultuous encounters with a host of spirits are reported. There are other recurrent elements. It is very common in these visions to be met by a relative who guides one over the obstacles in the visionary landscape. Often these relatives are white of skin, clothed in white, or change to white, for white is the color of the dead and those entirely purified of the sin of birth. Crowds of black people may be seen at first. But they have not eaten eboga and are, therefore, not able to pass completely to the beyond.

In addition to the reasons already given, the frequent reference in visions to river crossings and a great snake in the waters is a motif taken directly from Fang migration legends, which involved difficulties in crossing various watercourses until aided by any of various giant chthonic animals: crocodiles, snakes, hippopotami, lizards. It is of interest that in crossing these rivers the visionary (as in vision number 8) comes finally to a grassy upland. This reverses the migration experience of the Fang, which began in a grassy upland (the that of the morning return to the membership and the recounting of the experience. In a word, six stages: testing, ingesting, purifying, stupefaction, "dying" or excursion, and reintegration. This division accords well with the Banzie tendency to speak of stages or "sojourns" (azak) during the initiation: (1) "the stage of preparation" (azak akomnge); the stage of journeying (azak awulu); the stage of



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This "going back" in the vision is true in another sense. Banzie also say that eboga enables a man or woman to return to infancy and to birth - to the life in the womb. All the sins of life cause people to forget their origins and particularly their ultimate origins in mang ayat, the land of the dead beyond the sea. This is the land from which all spirits come to be incarnated and to which they return. The two sins of early life which cause forgetfulness of this ancestral land are sins of violating one's mother's private parts. One sins in being born and one sins in eating at one's mother's breast. If this propensity to violate another's being is allowed to continue into adulthood it eventuates in witchcraft, the consuming of another's substance. But eboga by returning initiates to the uterine condition, a condition in any case very close to life in the land of the dead, restores them to their own integrity - their pristine conditions. By carrying initiates forward to the land of the dead and backward both to savanna origins and the original uterine condition, eboga miraculously returns them to the same original and final place. It is another form of the "saving circularity."

Bwiti seeks in a variety of ways to attain to this "original and final" place - a spiritual Archimedean point, as it were, from which birth and death in all their contraries and complexities can be uniquely contemplated. This point is represented in several ways. The frequent reference in these visions to a one-stanchioned house - a glass or metal house built on a post - is an example. This visionary configuration seems to derive from Fang experience with a world globe seen in schools or colonial dwellings. Such a complete representation of the earth is more metaphysically impressive, Archimedean, than we might suspect. A similar ultimate place is obtained in the visions when the initiate arrives at the center of the rainbow. It is the spot from which he can see the entire circle of the rainbow as well as the entire circle of the earth. Even though the visionary may not have seen any spirits or gods in his journey this is a sign of the success of his vision.

The stereotyping of the visions reminds us of the fact, well recognized in the study of hallucinogens, that the content of the experience is more a function of the attitude set of the individual himself, of the social situation in which he takes the drug, and of the cultural setting of beliefs and values than of anything in the drug itself. The various chapels of Bwiti and the various branches of the cult differ, of course, in the sets they provoke in their initiates, the situation of initiation, and the Fang and Christian cultural setting they invoke.

When heavy doses of eboga are being taken, some chapels modify the ritual. Sometimes the initiate is surrounded by a vertiginous circle of members dancing, singing, and shouting. Drums may be beaten incessantly even in the initiate's ear, in representation of the sufferings of life pounding upon the spirit within the body until it is finally enabled to break through and fly.

So fierce and insistent is the ritual turmoil that hardly any drug would be needed for the initiate to be astounded, mesmerized, and carried away in enthusiasm or ecstasis. Most chapels provide very careful supervision of the initiate. The eboga parentage, the mother of eboga and the father of eboga, watch over him solicitously and encourage him against anxiety while protecting him against overdose. Initiates often begin to mumble or even shout incoherently under high dosage; the eboga mother and father listen intently to see if they can make out any message from eboga. It is their own soft voices whispering in the initiate's ear that he may take as the voices of the dead, while the turmoil of dancing and drumming is easily interpreted as the turbulent crowds of the dead.. Some chapels provide none of this careful construction of set and situation, and

these tend to be the houses afflicted with bad visions (ndem abe).

### **CONCLUSION: LIGHTENING THE BODY, RELEASING THE SPIRIT**

Eboga is often described by Banzie as a "miraculous" plant. It amazes by opening up both the initiate (once in a lifetime by massive doses) and all the Banzie (regularly by smaller doses) to greater possibilities of the self. In the one case this is the possibility of knowing the land of the dead and the dead themselves, of reestablishing forgotten or obscured continuities between the living and the dead. In the other case it is the possibility of performing an arduous all-night ritual without faltering. In both cases the once clotted body is transformed (afwalen) into something it always had the potential to be, and the once benighted and bush bound mind is given privileged - preeminent - intelligence.

Eboga makes the body lighter so that it can dance beautifully and so that the spirit within can be released. Eboga also acts to purify the body - this is its capacity as a forest bush - so that the "sins" accumulated by the body, first and most notably the "sins" of birth and lactation but subsequently the sins that arise out of the angers and desires of village life, can be removed. For these "sins" sully and clot the body and make it "obscure" and unable either to recollect or hope for the continuity of the living and the dead. Eboga, in short, acts to make the part which is the individual body and the individual animus of everyday life aware of the whole, the surpassing genealogical body and encompassing spirit. It enables Banzie to act upon that awareness - to become the whole - in all-night dance and song and in those initiatory excursions energized by eboga among the dead.

### **Notes on Chapter 18**

#1. Isolation of the crystalline ibogaine from the dried roots shows a chemical structure typical of many alkaloids. Ibogaine, although the major one, is not the only alkaloid in T. iboga, and it may be the work of several alkaloids in combination rather than ibogaine alone that gives the effect. See H. Pope, "Tabernanthe iboga: An African Narcotic Plant of Social Importance," for the most recent compilation on iboga.

#2. See also J.W. Fernandez, "Tabernanthe iboga: Narcotic Ecstasis and the Work of the Ancestors." There is some indication of earlier use of eboga by Fang, particularly in the ngi cult.

#3. Indeed, Banzie are quite cautious about giving eboga to people who otherwise seem susceptible to psychic disturbance such as Antoine the night-fool discussed in Chapter 8. It is said that eboga will carry such a person too far - to his death. It is also said that such a person will bring back a vision that is "difficult" (njuk). That is, it will be too idiosyncratic and a threat to the expected experience and its ready interpretation.

#4. Indeed Banzie say of Bwiti that it is a "path of trees" (zen bile). They contrast it with their sister, curing-cult, Mbiri, which is described as a path of plants, zen bilot. The reference is to the much greater therapeutic orientation of Mbiri and hence the greater use of medicinal plants. For example, plants are used to provoke vomiting in Mbiri while this is regarded as undersible in Bwiti.

#5. This fact about Fang was noted by Mary Kingsley (Travels in West Africa, p. 518) in arguing against the English anthropologist Taylor's notion of the origin of religion in dreams. Fang influenced by the coastal peoples, however, seem to have given more credence to the dreams, as the early American noted (R.H Nassau, Fetishism in West Africa, p. 161). Later on missionaries throughout Gabon made use of troubling dreams as signs interpretable as the will of God. They could be used to effect conversion. This is recurrently discussed in the journal of the Paris Mission Society (Journal des Missions Evangeliques), for example, 33 (1908):376.

#6. It is sometimes the case that the visions will contain some information that can be used against a person or chapel. It may be for this reason that in most chapels the leaders wish to be the first to whom the vision is recounted so as to detect and suppress such information.

#7. Several elements may be clarified. The bishop with the piled hair in the first vision may be Eyen Zame (Jesus), while the woman in the moon is Nyingwan Mebege. Their pierced and streaming hearts can probably be traced to Christian iconography which features the sacred heart of Mary in intrathoracic display.

#8. Henri M. Bot ba Njock ("Preeminences Sociales," pp. 155-156), points out the frequency with which intellectual preeminence had a visionary source.

#9. Letters commenting on this persistent Fang question are frequent in the JME. See particularly the volume for 1893, p. 96.

#10. Alexander and Binet, *Le Groupe*, pp. 104-106. Observations on Fang views of death are also found in Lageau, *Encyclopedie pouhouine*, pp. 460-468. In *Fetishism*, Nassau comments on this problem among Gabonese coastal people (pp. 10, 53-54).

#11. The existence and perdurance of multiple souls, the belief that souls could die and yet live, led to the curse of two deaths - wishing two deaths upon a person - a definitive death, as it were.

#12. Nassau, *Fetishism*, p. 209.

#13. This was essentially the promise made by the Antonian movement in Kongo in the sixteenth century. Of course the suggestion that they can control death is frequently part of the attraction of religious movements.

#14. Koptoff has demonstrated linguistically that Western notions of the discontinuity between life and death falsify the understanding in a good many African societies on the continuities between the living and the dead and the perception of the dead as, essentially, more distant elders. (I. Kopytoff, "Ancestors as Elders in Africa.")

#15. Once again the caution: since the words are in Popi that translation is not literal but a creative interpolation on the part of Bwiti informants. There is, however, a certain basic lexical knowledge of Tsogo on the part of most Banzie. *Mabasema* does mean twins in Togo, *duma* does mean thunder, etc.

#16. The leader of the Asumege Ening chapel at Kougouleu who translated this chant says that Popi is the Tsogo name for the narrator of eboga visions. "He is the one," he said, "who relates to the ancestral cult house, ebanja, the miraculous experiences of those who have eaten eboga."

#17. There are other ways of conceptualizing the stages of initiation. In chapels where other drugs are taken the stages are sometimes named after the drink or drug: the stage of eboga, the stage of "mulamba," the stage of hemp, etc. Since Banzie believe that people occupy various earths (*esi*) on their voyage from the below to the above, another way of conceiving of the stages is by reference to the four earths through which the spirits of men pass on their way to the land of the dead beyond the sea: the earth of birth (*si abiale*), the earth of death (*esi awu*), the earth of spirits (*esi minsism*), and the earth of Zame (*esi Zame*).

\*(1) In his "Sketch of Gabon and Its Interior," Edward Bowditch mentions the "crop": under fetish plants. It is a "favorite but violent medicine" which he took to be a charred fungus since he probably saw it in its powdered state (*Mission to Cape Coast Castle and Ashantee*, p. 445). French explorers knew it in mid-century and Griffon du Bellay brought specimens back from Cape Lopez ("Le Gabon"). The plant was investigated

intensively after the turn of the century by the French. Raponda-Walker and Sillans give a bibliography of this French work (*Rites et croyances des peuples du Gabon*. pp. 89-91).

\*(2) The Germans became interested in the drug in the 1880's when references to it appear in the reports of District Officers from Kamerun in *Mitteilungen aus den Deutschen Schutzgebieten* (in particular, Vol. 1. 1888. p. 49). In Volume XI of this colonial journal (1898, p. 29) the instrumental value of the root is recognized: "Its exciting effect on the nervous system makes its use highly valued on long tiring marches, on lengthy canoe trips, and on difficult nightwatches." Old informants in northern Gabon, formerly German Kamerun, say that the use of eboga was permitted, if not encouraged, by the Germans in their work gangs and colonial projects such as the Douala-Yaounde railroad, See J.. W. Fernandez. "Symbolic Consensus in a Fang Reformativ Cult."

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